



Taking Time: Harry Potter as a Context for Interdisciplinary Studies

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Taking Time

Harry Potter as a Context for Interdisciplinary Studies

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Popular culture can be an effective teaching tool across all disciplines. Literature such as the Harry Potter series opens the gateway for teachers to make connections with students and deepen students' thinking. One autumn I designed a thematic unit based on Harry Potter for my sixth-grade class. In the context of Harry's magic world, the students were enthusiastic about their studies. This English language arts novel study also included mathematics and science.

The students were captivated by J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York: Scholastic, 1998), which was being read aloud to them each morning. The eleven-year-olds could identify with Harry Potter's feelings of isolation and loneliness. They too were experiencing changes as they started their middle school years. Physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes in their lives were not unlike those Harry experienced while living with his aunt and uncle.

When Harry discovered he was a well-known wizard and was bound for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, his problems seemed to disappear.

At Hogwarts, Harry was a good student. He had a desire to learn about the world around him and he applied himself to his lessons. Like Harry, the sixth-grade students looked for relevance in their studies as they sought to discover how the world related to them.

Math and Science

The unit began with a mathematics budgeting activity that enabled the students to imagine themselves as classmates of Harry Potter, purchasing school supplies for Hogwarts School. Each student was assigned a character from the novel and given a different amount for his or her budget. A budget sheet outlined mandatory and optional items. Although Harry had inherited a lifetime's worth of gold from his parents, the other students in his class had allowances that varied according to their family's discretion.

In informal groups, the students discussed the problem and compared strategies for solving it. As classmates of Harry Potter, the students worked hard, focusing on balancing their budgets. This

activity gave them an authentic budgeting experience. They understood the reasons for budgeting and the process involved and could apply this knowledge in new contexts.

The activities were designed as exercises in problem-based learning where students identify the problem, generate facts and ideas, analyze the alternatives, and develop resolutions.

In the sciences, the links to Harry Potter required some thought. The four topics chosen for study allowed the students to imagine they were classmates of Harry, studying subjects from the Hogwarts School curriculum. Each topic was from a different field of science and all had links to Harry Potter that the students had identified in their opening classes. Harry had a textbook entitled *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*, so it seemed appropriate that the class would study mushrooms and fungi. In this study, the students engaged in secondary research in preparation for field research in a local woods. The second topic was a study of matter, which drew on laboratory experiments to prove science concepts that related to the three states of matter. The students

equated this to Harry's potions classes. A third topic examined the use of dissection in science, using owl pellets. The final topic examined science and technology that would be useful for wizards to know to better understand how people functioned without magic. As third-party observers to inventions in our world, students studied the development of useful technologies that had changed society.

In the constructivist classroom, small groups worked to develop an understanding of each science topic. Students collaborated on projects and learned new science skills through hands-on activities. Group discussions afforded the students opportunities to share their ideas, consider alternative viewpoints, and build on the ideas of others. Whole-class discussions were opportunities to share and compare results and to learn concepts that would assist in developing problem resolutions.

The students developed secondary research skills using books, journals, and the Internet. At the start of the science unit, most of the students had used the Internet to email one another or to construct personal Web sites; however, few students had experience using a search engine. For the units on mushrooms and fungi and owl pellets, the students used bookmarked Web sites to gain familiarity with the Internet. In the technology subject, the students had a formal lesson that introduced them to a children's search engine, and they were given the time needed to research their technology project topics.

The study of dissection is typical of the study of the other topics. Students designed an owl-pellet dissec-

tion through group meetings and Socratic discussion. Before engaging in the dissection, they used secondary sources to learn about species of owls indigenous to the area and the type of prey they consumed. The students also searched for diagrams of the bone structures of animals that the owls consumed. This information was important for identifying the animal whose bones were found in the owl pellet.

Writing about Harry Potter enabled them to think through issues and develop understanding.

Throughout the science unit, students kept individual science journals detailing learned concepts and the processes in which they had engaged. The entries included field reports, research reports, and responses to experiments. By integrating language arts skills with sciences, we had time for peer editing and teacher-student writing conferences. Students' science journals were graded for form and content, and students rewrote and resubmitted those journal entries that did not meet class standards the first time.

In mathematics, the students continued to experience the Harry Potter context in word problems. This context had a motivating effect on their work, and it created positive attitudes toward mathematics. The final activity in the unit consisted of preparing report cards for Harry Potter and his class. As the professors at Hogwarts School had been busy protecting the sorcerer's stone during the semester, they had not had the time to translate student grades into percentages. Raw scores for five subject

areas mentioned in the novel were assigned to each Hogwarts student. The sixth-grade students calculated the percentage grades for the Hogwarts students' report cards.

Some of the sixth-grade students brought projects to school that they had undertaken at home to show to the class and to me. These writing, art, and science projects all related to the Harry Potter theme.

Language Arts

Language arts activities were designed to trigger thinking about elements in the novel that reflect the realities of evil and deception in society. Students explored these themes from Harry's perspective, adopting his ethics and applying them to situations created in the activities. This is not to suggest blind acceptance of Harry's perspectives on problems. The activities were designed as exercises in problem-based learning where students identify the problem, generate facts and ideas, analyze the alternatives, and develop resolutions.

The creative writing projects developed critical thought at three different levels—literal, interpretive, and creative-critical. At the most basic level, the students answered direct questions pertaining to the novel such as identifying where, who, and what. Students demonstrated literal comprehension by completing a crossword puzzle.

Interpretive-level thinking resulted from examining elements of the novel in context. Students composed an interview with a character in the novel after the first week of classes at Hogwarts School. Doing this required knowledge of the plot and settings as well as an understanding of the character and his or her background.

Some students chose to compose their interviews as a dialogue between two characters, while others used a direct interviewing technique for the wizard newspaper. As students had many ideas that could be incorporated into an interview, I encouraged them to make webs to organize their thinking.

Creative-critical thinking required that the student make an informed decision or conclusion based on analysis and evaluation of the novel's elements. As a group, students wrote an editorial that examined the destruction of the sorcerer's stone and evaluated whether it was indeed the best outcome for the world. The students examined the stone's destruction as decision makers, analyzing their motives as well as those arguments against the destruction of the sorcerer's stone. The groups recorded each side of the argument on chart paper to identify the central problem. The groups reviewed the elements of the problem and generated data for analysis before arriving at a resolution. Using their charts and applying critical thought, they constructed their editorials and concluded that the destruction of the sorcerer's stone was indeed the best outcome.

I also asked students to explore the differences and similarities between the two principal houses at Hogwarts School and evaluate the merits of each. By constructing a comparison-and-contrast chart, or a Venn diagram, the students were able to identify the elements they would consider when forming their conclusions. This activity highlighted the themes of good and evil that underlie events in the novel. It is an exercise in creative-critical thinking and organization of original thought.

For some students, responding to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* filled a need for self-expression and the desire to record their thinking about the world. As Harry Potter's world mirrors our own, the meanings they derived from the literature

By first discussing an event in the novel or the day's reading and then expanding the Socratic discussion to parallel experiences in the students' lives, they were able to develop insights from Harry's actions and feelings.

could be applied to situations in daily life. Writing about Harry Potter enabled them to think through issues and develop understanding. Thinking critically about the metaphors in the novel provided opportunities to examine issues that are important to adolescents.

In both their language arts responses and in daily discussions of the readings, the students explored issues that related to contemporary society. By first discussing an event in the novel or the day's reading and then expanding the Socratic discussion to parallel experiences in the students' lives, they were able to develop insights from Harry's actions and feelings. Through discussing Harry's adventures, they were able to verbalize some of their thoughts and feelings.

In a discussion of Harry's family life, the students pondered the question of extended family and the history shared with relatives. Harry was caught in an abusive relationship during his childhood in which he was unable to define himself. At Hogwarts School, Harry learned about his parents and the values they defended. This gave Harry a history on which to

build and a sense of what he could accomplish. The students felt that they were influenced by the values their parents held and the history of their ancestors who had come to Canada for a better life.

When considering peer relations, the sixth-grade students drew on their experiences with group work in the Harry Potter unit. They felt effective teams existed when students respected one another and worked toward common goals. The group becomes more important than the individual through incorporating ideas from all sources by a process that builds on input from all sources.

Friendship is a theme that underlies many of the events in the novel and is a concern for most students in classroom settings. In examining the friendships and alliances of the Hogwarts School students, the sixth-grade students agreed that friends are those with whom we share interests and values. They believed that Ron and Harry had the ultimate friendship as evidenced by Ron's decision to face death so that Harry could protect the sorcerer's stone from danger.

The question of economic inequality was triggered by the descriptions of Ron's family and the verbal abuse he suffered at the hands of his enemies. The students recognized that economic status depended largely on an individual's ability to work in society and that some jobs pay more than others, usually depending on the worker's level of education. In poor countries many children do not have food and clean water, nor are there agencies with sufficient funding to help everyone.

The novel created opportunities to discuss loyalty, respect, and ethics.

Most of the discussions were initiated after each morning's half-hour reading from the novel, but some were integrated into lessons within the thematic unit. During study of the technology topic, the students engaged in a case study that explored ethics in technology and were able to use their experiences of analyzing good and evil themes to determine the pros and cons of the situation.

Both the classroom discussions and the creative writing project began by examining events in the novel that connected with students. By starting with a familiar context, we made the novel a part of their history and experience.

The students enjoyed the creative writing project and their responses reflected strong engagement in the tasks and the application of critical thought in the construction of their solutions. They worked diligently and revised their work as required. I enjoyed reading the responses; they reflected serious thought, originality, and an immersion in Harry's magic world that informed their analysis of the problems presented by the activities. Their understanding of the wizard world gave them

confidence in their work and promoted detailed responses. The topics for discussion appealed to the students and they exhibited a high degree of concentration as they worked diligently toward creating complete responses.

Since students' listening comprehension is higher than their reading comprehension, discussions of word meanings were interesting and valuable to the students. They learned the meaning of words from the novel, the definitions of science words, and the meaning of mathematics terms. They also enjoyed defining French names that reflected the character of those with French names in the novel. Doing so provided them with additional insight and a desire to learn more French.

Life Lessons and Intellectual Growth

Rowling has built many life lessons into the story of Harry's first year at Hogwarts School. From the perspectives of the eleven-year-old children who are the main characters, the reader learns about the magical world. As Harry learns

about the wizard world and experiences life as a famous wizard, he is confronted with new situations that stretch his experience and require him to think quickly and confront his enemies. He succeeds in overcoming many challenges because his values are so strong that when he reacts, he stays true to himself.

The Harry Potter thematic unit facilitated intellectual growth for the sixth-grade students, who were motivated by their interest in wizard studies. They experienced a wide range of topic areas in the process of listening to the novel, studying mathematics and science, and acting out the academic life of Harry Potter.

Although I used the Harry Potter series in my teaching, other popular novels can be used to inspire, to stimulate imagination, and to invite all disciplines to play a role in developing higher-level thinking in students.

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